



An Introduction to Primary Sources: Photographs in the Archives

TARGET GRADE RANGE: 1-5

OVERVIEW

By looking closely at photographs from several moments in Savannah's history, students will learn the basic tools for analyzing photographic images using description and reflection in order to improve visual literacy, as well as to identify the strengths and weaknesses of using photographs as a historical tool. Students will create a brief story, journal entry, or art piece reflecting on the subjects of the photographs.

What is a Primary Source?

A primary source is a first-hand, original account or record about a person, place, object, or an event. Oral histories, objects, photographs, and documents such as newspapers, census records, diaries, and journals are primary sources. Secondary sources are accounts, records, or evidence derived from original or primary sources. Textbooks are secondary sources.

Objectives:

After completing this learning activity, students will be able to:

- Describe the subjects of photographs and place them in a historical context
- Understand the value of photographs as historical records

Time Required: 1 hour

Topic/s: Social Studies, Art, Creative Writing

Standards:

- The student understands the visual arts in relation to history and culture (National Standard 4).
- VA3MC.2 Formulates personal responses to visual imagery.
- VA3CU.1 Investigates and discovers the personal relationship of artist to community, culture, and world through making and studying art. a. Recognizes the unique contributions of contemporary and historical Georgia artists and art forms. b. Discovers personal relationship to community, culture, and world through making and studying art.
- VA3CU.2 Views and discusses selected artworks. a. Names subject and theme. b. Uses context clues to identify time and place. c. Identifies artist and culture. d. Recognizes media and technique. e. Discusses the purpose of art in various cultures (e.g., aesthetic, utilitarian).
- VA3.RE.1 Use a variety of approaches for art criticism and to critique personal works of art and the artwork of others to enhance visual literacy. a. Use art terminology with emphasis on the elements of art and/or principles of design. b. Recognize that responses to art change depending on knowledge of the time, place, and culture in which works of art are created. c. Use a variety of approaches to engage in verbal and/or written art criticism.

**Materials:**

Materials may be original or reproduction, at the discretion of the Archivist and Municipal Archives Director.

- “Photographs: Introduction to Photographs” handout, from *Engaging Students with Primary Sources*, developed by the Smithsonian National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center, in partnership with Thinkfinity, page 24 (available online at: <https://historyexplorer.si.edu/sites/default/files/PrimarySources.pdf>)
- “Photographs: Strengths and Limitations: handout, from *Engaging Students with Primary Sources*, developed by the Smithsonian National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center, in partnership with Thinkfinity, page 25 (available online at: <https://historyexplorer.si.edu/sites/default/files/PrimarySources.pdf>)
- Photograph Analysis Worksheets (1 per student per station)
 - “Analyze a Photograph” handout, developed by the National Archives and Records Administration (available online at: https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/photo_analysis_worksheet_novice.pdf)
 - “Tips for Reading Photographs” handout, from *Engaging Students with Primary Sources*, developed by the Smithsonian National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center, in partnership with Thinkfinity, pages 26-28 (available online at: <https://historyexplorer.si.edu/sites/default/files/PrimarySources.pdf>)
- 5 – 10 photographs from the Municipal Archives’ collections
 - Teachers conducting the program in the classroom may use the Sample Photographs Packet provided or identify photographs from the Municipal Archives Online Digital Image Catalog at www.savannahga.gov/DigitalCollections. Municipal Archives staff can provide additional images on-demand based on subject needs, as available.
- Paper, pencils, markers to create reflective responses



PROGRAM:

Introduction: (10-15 minutes total)

- Introduction to concepts of archives and archival work, and the City of Savannah Municipal Archives
- Introduction to photographs
- Talk through the process of analyzing a picture together for the first station

Rotating Stations: (30 minutes)

- Break students into 5-10 groups (depending on the number of students – groups should be between 3-5 students) and assign them a station to start. Each station will take 10 minutes, then rotate to the next station.
- Have a photograph that students can pick up, hold, pass around etc. Have the Photograph Analysis Worksheets available at the station.
- Have students closely analyze the picture, describing what the occasion is, what the perspective is, who or what is pictured, how they think the subjects feel, what they are wearing, what we can learn from the image, etc.
- After 7-10 minutes, switch to a new station, repeat the process 3-4 times. Depending on the size of the group, there may need to be a period where the students can go around and look at each of the remaining pictures briefly.

Creative Reflection (15 minutes)*:

Have students decide on a favorite image and create a reflective response to it.

Examples:

- A journal entry written as if you were a subject of the photo writing about the day the photo was taken
- Write a newspaper article about the event (who, what, when, where, why)
- A drawing of a detail of the photograph that catches your attention
- A drawing of what happened right before or right after the photograph was taken

Have students stand by the photograph they choose and ask for volunteers to share their reflection.

**Alternatively, teachers may assign this as a take-away reflection or journaling assignment.*

Photographs

Introduction to Photographs

Photographs provide us with images of past events. Today, historians study the content and the meaning of these visual images to locate information about a particular topic, time, or event. Photographs can convey countless details about life. For historians and for us, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Photographers have the ability to manipulate, intentionally or unintentionally, the record of the event. It is the photographer—and the camera’s frame—that defines the picture’s content.

Historians who study the everyday lives of anonymous people find photographs are an invaluable source. Sometimes photographs are the only means of reconstructing the material world and behavior of people who did not leave many written records.

Yet, photographs, like other primary sources, must be studied carefully and critically. While they appear to be the most objective and accurate of all primary sources, they MAY not be. Photographs are the product of many variables, including, the photographer’s intention, the user’s need, the viewer’s interpretation and the equipment’s technical abilities.

Photographers have the ability to manipulate, intentionally or unintentionally, the record of the event. It is the photographer—and the camera’s frame—that defines the picture’s content. Thus, the photographer chooses what will be in the picture, what will be left out, and what the emphasis will be.

The first steps in using photographs as a primary source are to identify the subject and content of the photograph, and the contextual information that may not be in the photograph, such as learning about the photographer. What was the photographer’s intention? Was the photographer hired for a specific purpose? Was the photographer a partial or seemingly impartial observer, an insider or an outsider?

Like all other primary sources, photographs must be studied in conjunction with other evidence. One must look at many photographs, related documents, and oral histories to determine if a photograph’s information is unusual or part of a larger pattern.

Photographs: Strengths and Limitations

Primary Source

Photographs: Visual records obtained through photography

Strengths

- + Visual records of a moment in time
- + Convey many details about people, places, objects, and events
- + Convey information about everyday life and behavior that is best communicated in visual terms (hair and clothing styles, interior design)
- + Sometimes provide evidence of attitude
- + Important to the study of people who did not leave many written records
- + Can stimulate the personal involvement of the viewer
- + Do not require fluency in a particular language to understand
- + Can be used to stimulate the memory of people

Limitations

- Not a complete or objective source: the image that serves as the lasting record does not equate directly with the reality of the event itself
- Relationship of the photographer to those being photographed often difficult to determine
- Reflect the bias or perspective of the photographer including choices about:
 - what is included in the frame of the camera
 - the moment in time recorded in the photograph
 - the subject matter that the person present at the event thought was important to record
 - whether or not to manipulate the people or objects in the picture
- People, place, date, and the name of the photographer are often not identified.
- The emotions and thoughts of those involved often are not evident.
- Information from this kind of source is often suggestive rather than definitive. Photographs must be studied in conjunction with other evidence. One must look at many photographs and/or other source materials such as documents and oral histories to determine if the information is unusual or part of a larger pattern.



Tips for Reading Photographs

1 of 3

Use this guide to help you analyze photographs. Answer as many of the questions as you can using evidence from the photograph. Write your answers to as many questions as possible based on what you see and what you may already know.

First Impressions

What are your first impressions?

Take a closer look . . . make sure to examine the whole photograph.

Make a list of any people in the photograph.

What is happening in the photograph?

Make a list of any activities you see going on in the photograph.

Make a list of any objects in the photograph.

Make a list of any animals in the photograph.



Tips for Reading Photographs

2 of 3

Looking More Closely

Are there any captions? A date? Location? Names of people?

What kind of clothing is being worn?

Is there any lettering on signs or buildings?

What time of year is pictured? Time of day? Cite your evidence.

Where was the photograph taken? Cite your evidence.

Thinking Further

If people are in the photograph, what do you think is their relationship to one another?

Can you speculate on a relationship of the people pictured and someone who is not in the picture?



Tips for Reading Photographs

3 of 3

What do you think happened just before the picture was taken?

What do you think happened just after the photograph was taken?

Who do you think took the photograph? Why?

What does this photograph suggest to you? Describe your reaction in a statement.

What questions do you have about the photograph? How could you try to answer them?

What is the one thing that you would remember most about this photograph? Why?

What questions do you have about the photograph that you cannot answer through analyzing it? Where could you go next to answer these questions?



Analyze a Photograph



Meet the photo.

What do you see?

Is the photo?

☐ BLACK
AND
WHITE

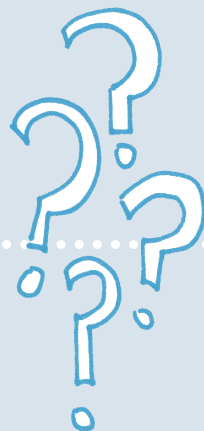
☐ COLOR

Is there a caption?

☐ YES

☐ NO

If so, what does the caption tell you?



Observe its parts.

Circle what you see in the photo.



PEOPLE



OBJECTS



BOTH

What are the people doing in the photo?

What are the objects used for in the photo?

Write two words that describe the photo.

Try to make sense of it.

Who do you think took this photo?

Where do you think this photo was taken?

List something that helps you prove where it was taken.

Why do you think the photo was taken?

How does this photo compare to modern times?

Use it as historical evidence.

Where do you think we could find out more information about the people or objects in the photo?





An Introduction to Primary Sources: Photographs in the Archives

Sample Photographs Packet

INSTRUCTOR'S IMAGE LIST

Image 1

Andrea Burgstiner and Shriners at Shrine Bowl Game, November 1969

Record Series 0120-006, City Manager's Office Photographs, Box 0120-006-1, Folder 24, Item 2

Image 2

City employees participating in health fair, October 1994

Record Series 0123-045, Public Information Office Photographs, Box 0123-045-5, Folder 63, Item 13

Image 3

Savannah building slated for preservation, no date

Record Series 0123-045, Public Information Office Photographs, Box 0123-045-5, Folder 65, Item 13

Image 4

"Savannah, GA, View North from DeSoto Hotel."

Postcard published by J. S. Oppenheimer Cigar Company of Savannah depicting a bird's-eye view of the city, 1898

Record Series 1121-057, V. & J. Duncan Postcard Collection, Item 9

Image 5

Broughton Street after a snow, circa 1914

Record Series 1121-057, V. & J. Duncan Postcard Collection, Item 49

Image 6

Westley Wallace "W. W." Law, President of the King-Tisdell Cottage Foundation, receiving the Governor's Award from Governor Joe Frank Harris, April 1989

Photograph is signed by Governor Harris

Record Series 1121-1000, W. W. Law Photograph Collection, Item 165

Image 7

First grade students at Massie Elementary School reciting the pledge of allegiance, September 1967

Record Series 1121-1000, W. W. Law Photograph Collection, Item 739

Image 8

Savannah Light Infantry, Co. D, 1st Infantry (Colored), Captain H. N. Walton, Commanding, January 1, 1901, photograph by Wilson, taken in front of the U. S. Custom House

Record Series 1121-1000, W. W. Law Photograph Collection, Item 1742

Image 9

"Welcome Home Day" parade for returning World War I soldiers, March 4, 1919

Record Series 1121-057, V. & J. Duncan Postcard Collection, Item 347

Image 10

Stereograph card of a bird's-eye view painting of Savannah. This is a reproduction of J. W. Hill's 1855 painting of Savannah made from a view looking south on Bull Street from the City Exchange. The stereograph card is circa 1867-1885.

Record Series 1121-069, Girvin Family Collection of Savannah Stereographs, Item 43

Image 11

Stereograph card of a photograph of Forsyth Park Fountain, circa 1870-1888, photograph by Wilson & Havens

Record Series 1121-069, Girvin Family Collection of Savannah Stereographs, Item 14

Image 12

Portrait of an unidentified woman, circa 1880-1890, photograph by J. N. Wilson

Record Series 1121-1000, W. W. Law Photograph Collection, Item 1691

Image 13

Unidentified family portrait, no date

Record Series 1121-1000, W. W. Law Photograph Collection, Item 1700



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

SAVANNAH, GA

View North from De Soto Hotel,

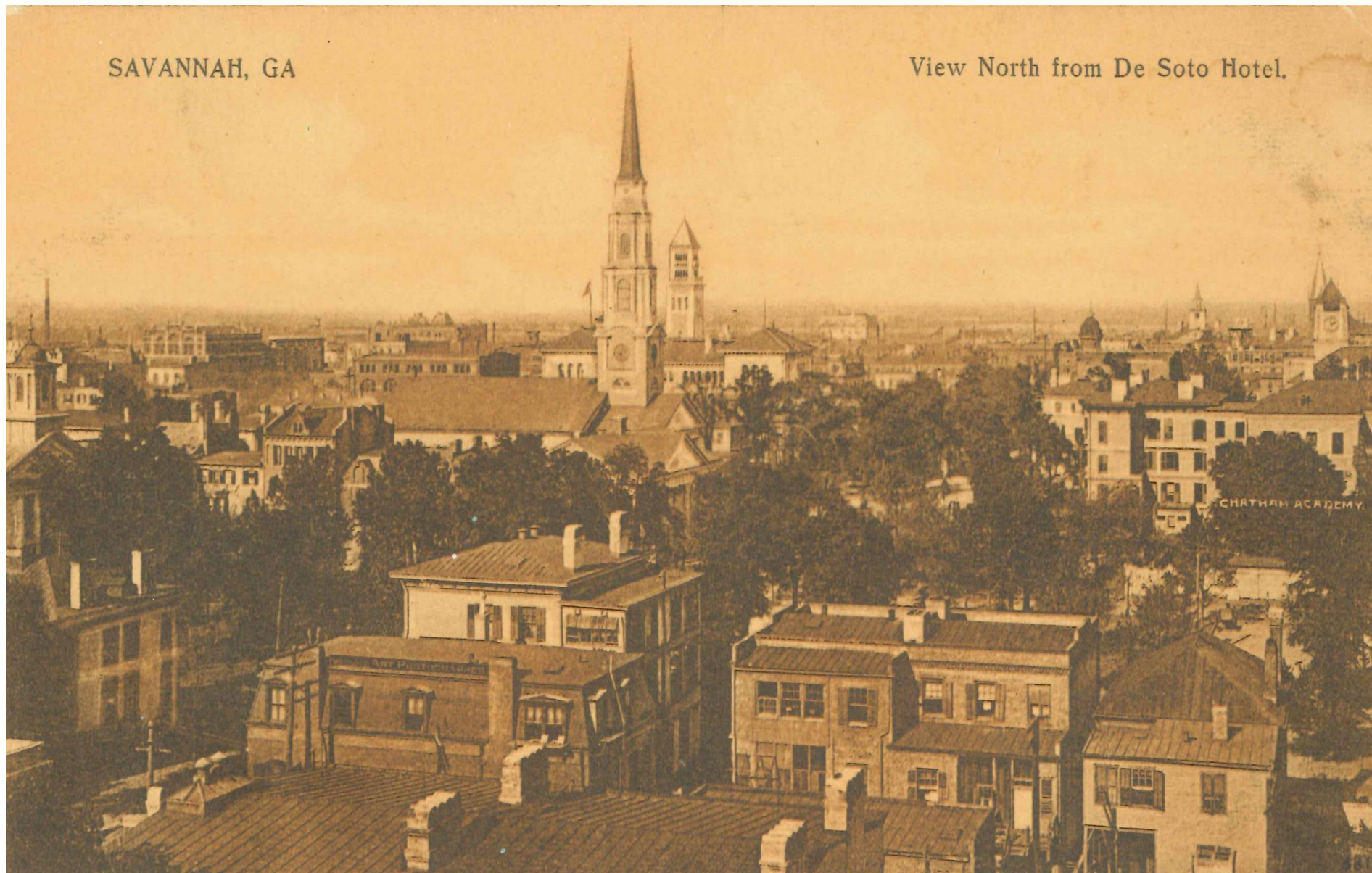


Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7

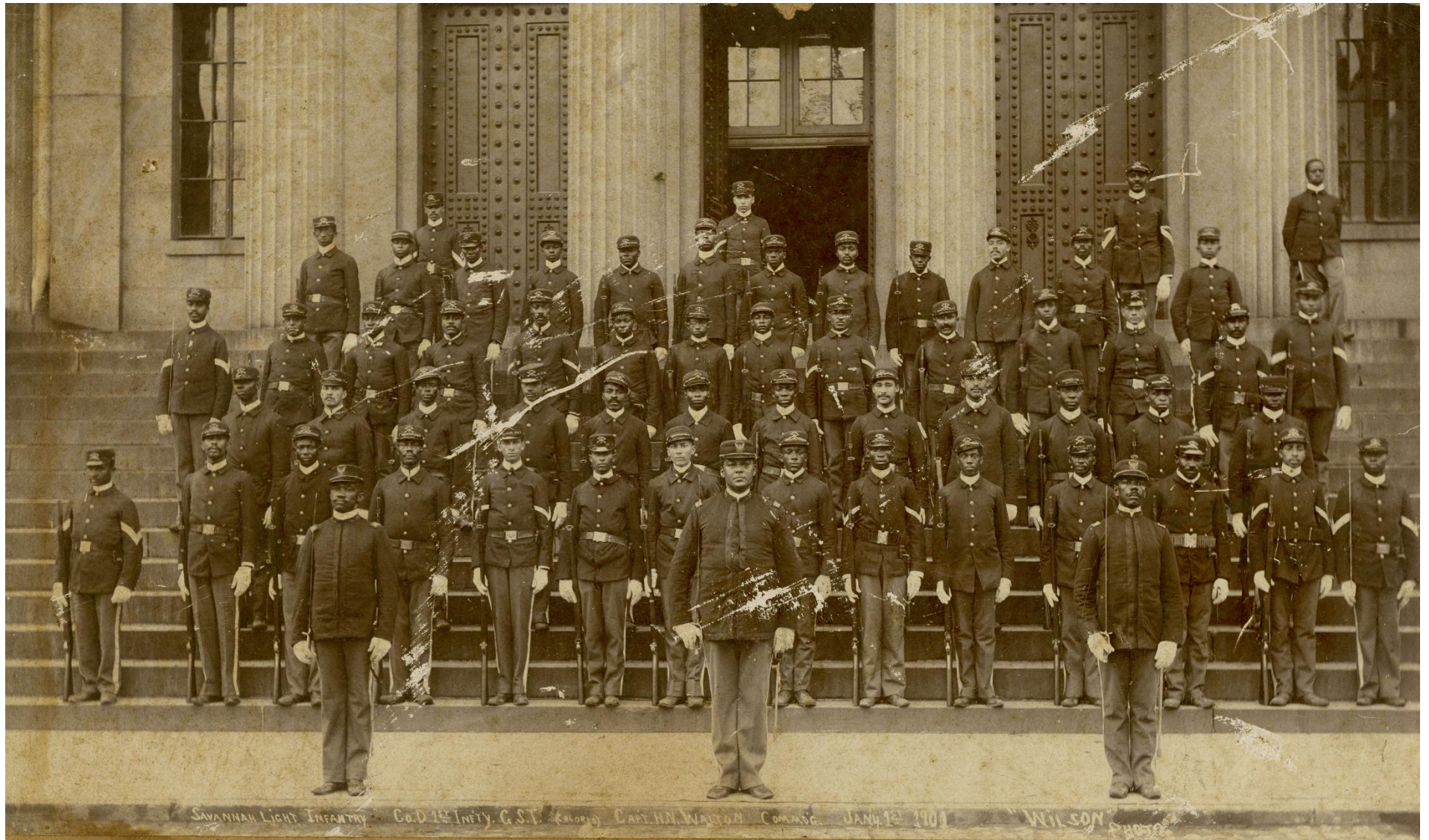


Image 8



Image 9

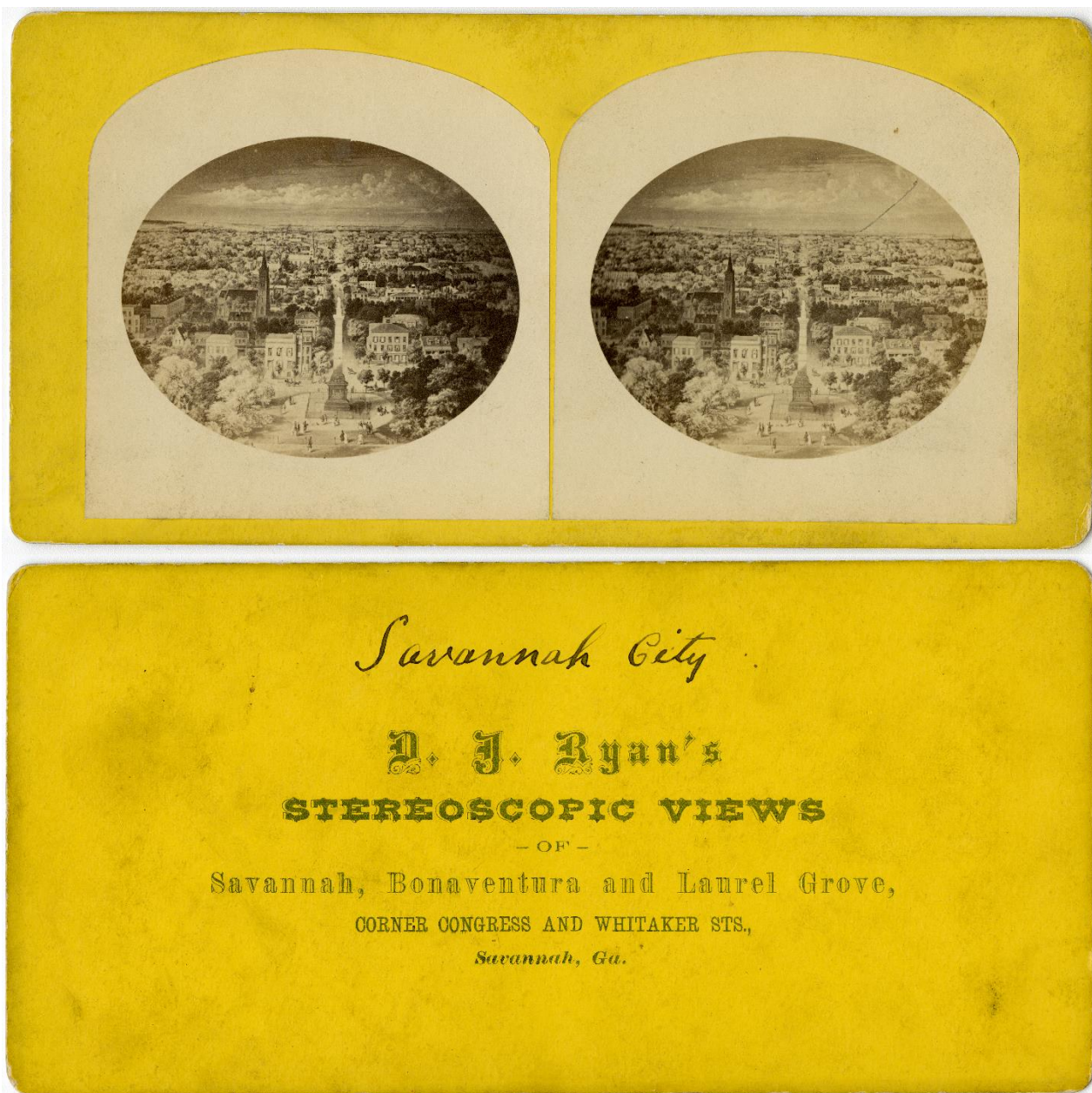
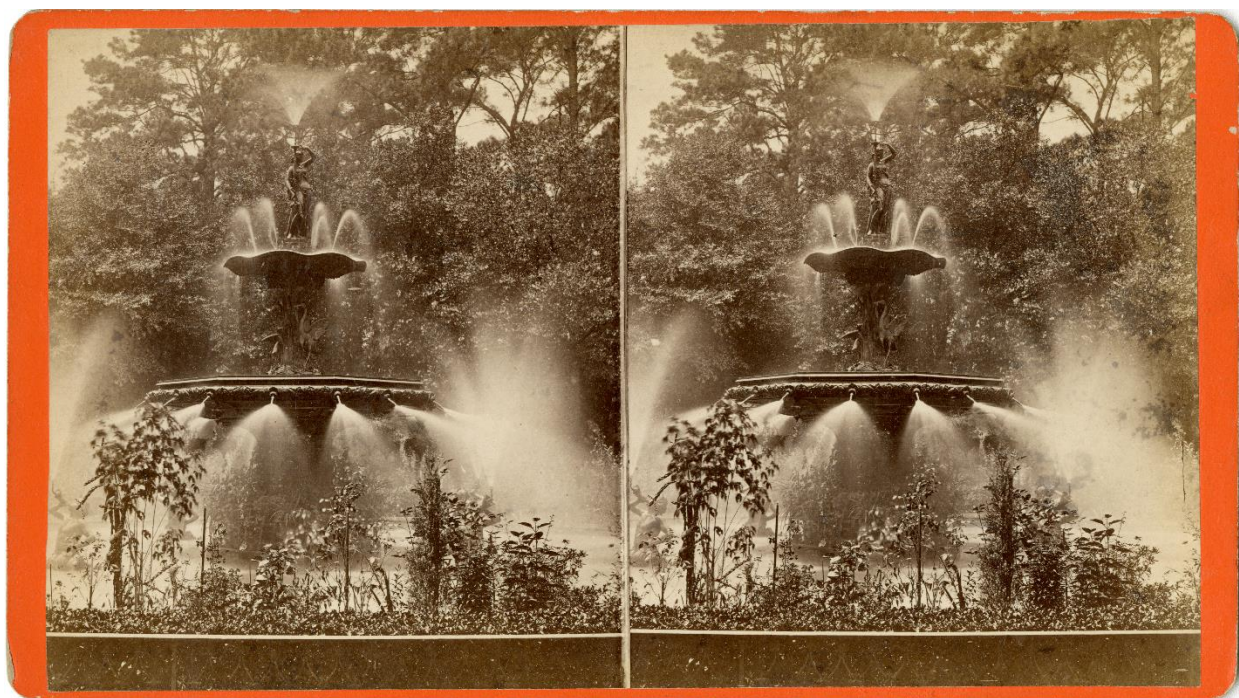


Image 10



M¹ "Fannie Foster" 3-15-44

PHOTOGRAPHED BY WILSON & HAVENS,

SAVANNAH, GA.

Park Fountain

UM. A. 52

827

Image 11



Image 12



Image 13